

NEW PUBLICATIONS.

MR. HOWELL'S NEW STORY.

WOMAN'S REASON. A Novel. By WILLIAM D. HOWELL. 12mo, pp. 468. James R. Osgood & Co.

A sudden fashion in criticism has lately deemed that whenever Mr. Howell writes a new book he shall be condemned for not being somebody else instead of himself. We are prepared therefore to be told that as a novel of incident "A Woman's Reason" is not to be compared with "The Woman in White," and that as a story the book is much less exciting than "Vanity Fair." The admirers of Mr. Howell—and in that large party of readers we are most certainly to be reckoned—will not care about disputing these propositions. They will remember that Mr. Howell has never tried to tell a sensational story, or to construct an intricate plot, and that the characters and manners he has chosen to describe have generally been those which fall under our daily observation. Whether his topics are compatible with the highest order of novel-writing or not is a question hardly worth disputing. It is enough to take his books for what they are and what they profess to be; to look at the intrinsic value of their art, rather than to speculate upon the relative importance of something entirely different. We have been chattering these many years for an American novelist; and when we find one—as we found Bayard Taylor twenty years ago—we read his books, and forget that they are American, and go on with the clamor as if the American novelist had not already appeared. The stories of Mr. Howell are not only American in their personages and their local coloring, but they represent certain fine shades of the national character and temperament which we all recognize when they are pointed out to us, but which nobody before him ever knew how to indicate. The New-England country girl and the Boston young lady are drawn in his pages with a startling fidelity to life. That would not be a very high merit, because externally the types are somewhat commonplace. But with a dash touch wholly his own Mr. Howell adds to his portraits of ordinary people a spiritual quality which lifts them out of the vulgar category into the higher regions of true art. The quickness of observation, the keen appreciation of the motives which sway sensitive and sincere persons, the unmistakable relish for whatever is true and honest and refined in the life around us, save Mr. Howell's sketches from the approach of being common, even when they are most simple and familiar.

In "A Modern Instance" he drew vulgar characters for a set purpose; and he did it in a masterly manner. In "A Woman's Reason" he deals with the most amiable and attractive men and women and the purest springs of action, and his art is as firm as in the other book and much more agreeable. We have read the first chapter several times, always with a new delight, partly because it sets the key of the story so perfectly, and partly because it engages our sympathies so promptly and adroitly with the heroine, and still more because it is so good an example of Mr. Howell's literary method. Nothing could be less romantic than the materials with which it deals. Boston Common and Beacon Street, a decayed merchant and a slim young lady, would promise little in other hands; but Mr. Howell makes them fascinating from the first paragraph, in which a couple are exhibited on one of the common benches, "making love almost as frankly in that public place as they might in the seduction of a crowded railway train," to the last line in which we have seen a beautiful picture of Helen sitting by her father's couch in the gloom of approaching sorrow. The description of Helen's arrival at the house, just after Mr. Harkness, having been taken ill in the street, has been helped home by a policeman, is worth a long quotation:

"The policeman flung the dust from the breast and collar of his coat, in walking back to his beat, with the right feeling of a man who would like to be better prepared in summer. Mr. Harkness, stammering, and to me in memory of his house a young lady of such beauty and elegance as he had just encountered. This young lady, as he closed the door behind him, had run up the steps with the loop of her train in one hand—after the fashion of ten years ago, and in the other a pretty travelling-bag, carried with the fearless air of a woman who knew that people are not to be trifled with. She glanced a little wistfully, a little defiantly, at the policeman, seeing that she must drop one or the other of her burdens to ring, politely rang for her. 'Thank you!' said the young lady, speaking a little more wonderingly, a little more defiantly than she had looked.

"Quite welcome, Miss," returned the policeman, and as he bent in going down the stairs, while the young lady turned and stared after him, leaving a little over the top step on which she stood, with her back to the door. She was very pretty indeed, with blue eyes, at once tender and honest, and the fair hair, that goes with their beauty, hanging loosely over her shoulders. Her dress, in this young perspective of outline, had a finish beyond the usual delicate color; the head and her eager dash up the steps had suffused them with a glow, that seemed moment to deepen and soften. Her loveliness was saved from the insipidity of faultless lines by a little downward cast—a quirk or calligraphic, a little of her own, that gave it a more personal and vivifying character. Her eyes, in their young perspective of outline, had a finish beyond the usual delicate color; the head and her eager dash up the steps had suffused them with a glow, that seemed moment to deepen and soften.

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"How d'do, Margaret?" She greeted the cook in a voice whose bright kindness seemed to the admiration of her girlish friends. "I am sorry to say I have to see the doctor, wait for the cook's answer, but put down her bag, and began pulling off her gloves, after shaking out her skirt, and giving that penetrating sidelong downward look at it, which women always give their drapery at moments of arrival or departure. She turned to the drawing-room, the hall, and went up to the long, glass-paned mirror, and glanced at the face which it dimly showed her in the close shuttered room. The face had apparently not changed since she last saw it in that mirror, and one might have fancied that the young lady was somewhat surprised at this.

Now there is something far beyond photographic accuracy in this—and something beyond mere felicity of style. There is a charming play of fancy; there are what we may fairly call flashes of imagination; and we have only to study the picture of Helen, in that "positive grace which is so eminently the gift of exquisite nerves," standing with her vivid bird-like mobility "as if she had alighted upon the edge of the step," greeting the cook "in a voice whose bright kindness seemed the translation of her girlish beauty into sound," shaking her skirt and glancing at her face in the parlor mirror,—we have only to observe how suggestive and how alluring are all the daintily chosen and perfectly finished details of this scene to understand the vast difference between the art of Mr. Howell and the hard exactness of the realists, and to see how it is that his best passages so often approach the verge of opulence. There are other descriptive pages in the book much stronger and more vivid than this; but the extract we have given is thoroughly characteristic.

In the selection of his personages Mr. Howell this time has been peculiarly happy. Helen's trials are sometimes a little vexations to the reader, as they are to the young lady's friends; but we are all forced to admit, as they were, that her woman's reasons are good ones, and she never loses her hold upon our affection. We hardly know why it is, but in her refinement and nobility there seems to be something distinctively American, as if even virtue, like beauty, had an elusive and indefinable bloom of its own in this country, rarer and softer than that of other lands; and many of Mr. Howell's heroines give us the same impression—which is our reason why we become so fond of them. Marian is an equally fortunate conception. Captain Butler is a delightful figure; and Lord Rutherford is so well done that for his sake we could almost wish for a different ending of the story. And this reminds us that, as a story, the new book is much better than its immediate predecessor. It would be too much to say that there is a plot, but there is more incident of a highly dramatic character—and with respect to one great point the reader is indulged with the luxury of suspense almost until the very last. But these traits of resemblance to the ordinary novel consti-

tute only a small part of the value of the book. It would be charming even with no problems and perplexities at all.

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